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## Abigail McEwan, Revolutionary Horizons: Art and polemics in 1950s Cuba

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- 1 Impressively documented and lavishly illustrated, this book traces the history of abstract art as it came to prominence in Cuba in the 1950s. Flourishing against the backdrop of the Batista dictatorship, which at a given moment co-opted abstract art as part of its modernization project, the current was marginalized after the Revolution because of its supposed lack of social concern as well as of “Cubanness”. However, Abigail McEwan shows that abstract art originally emerged outside of official culture and prolonged a tradition of vanguard thinking articulated around a “cubanista canon” (p. 179) which was based on both “culturalism” and “internationalism” (*ibid.*). This dimension first came to the fore in the anti-Biennale of 1954, organized by abstract artists (“Los Once”) who protested against the ideological recuperation of national hero José Martí in the official Biennale of 1953. Marginalized through pecuniary and other reprisals by the Batista regime, Los Once found a successor in Los Diez, who practiced geometric abstraction from a humanist and utopian perspective. The aspirational and interventionist dimension of abstract art became problematic in the first years after the Cuban Revolution, when vocabularies gradually turned Marxist, and anti-imperialism replaced pan-Americanism – a discourse that had allowed strategic alliances between Cuban abstractionism and the contemporary New York School. Abstract art did not disappear in subsequent years, but “came to mean something ontologically different” (p. 213) – an interesting idea that would have deserved further exploration. Still, as it stands, this remarkably well-written book constitutes a true model for interdisciplinary approaches to art history because of its skillful navigation between different contextual layers (the political, the institutional, the cultural, the discursive) and various manifestations of abstract art (painting, sculpture, architecture, typography, music). In addition, Abigail McEwan’s book is of crucial importance to scholarship on Cuba as it opens up new appreciations of the 1950s, laying bare the complexities of a decade which had been neglected for a long time or exclusively

treated in exceptionalist terms. The fact that Cuba recently awarded a national prize to one of Cuba's leading figures of abstract art – Pedro de Oraá, in 2015 – illustrates the urgency of this publication. An indispensable work of reference for any library specializing in Latin American art and beyond.